

**THE HISTORY
AND
ORGANIZATION
OF THE CCF
IN THE PROVINCIAL
CONSTITUENCY OF
HUMBOLDT
1933–1954**

The History and Organization of the C.C.F. in The Provincial Constituency of Humboldt 1933-1954.

In midsummer of 1933 a small group of progressive minded men from Humboldt, Fulda, Muenster, Leroy, Saxby, Meacham, Rutan and Colonsay met in Humboldt to consider the possibility of organizing the constituency on behalf of the Farmer-Labour Party (the Saskatchewan Provincial Section of the newly formed C.C.F. Party) with a view to nominating a candidate for the forthcoming provincial election.

The group was few in numbers and everyone of them realized the enormous task ahead of them if they were to challenge the supremacy of the Liberal Party, which seemed to have a strangle hold on the political affairs in the constituency, because from the very beginning of the province twenty eight years before, in election after election a Liberal member had been returned to office and every candidate opposing them invariably lost his deposit.

But the small group referred to was determined to crack the Liberal machine in the constituency, and everyone present dedicated himself to the cause of electing a truly people's representative to the Legislature.

Plans were made to set up a tentative organizational committee and to call a convention later in the fall. The following November delegates from the majority of polls in the constituency assembled in the Humboldt City Hall. (It may be of interest to note that since that time there has been a C.C.F. Convention in this constituency every year, regardless of how much or how often the boundaries of the constituency were changed.) After a full discussion by the delegates at that first convention it was unanimously agreed to organize on a permanent basis, and to nominate a candidate to contest the next election. Their choice was Joseph W. Burton, a farmer who had been active in community, farmer and co-operative organizations. Neither he nor those nominating him had any premonition of the nightmare of the five elections that were to follow in less than five years, but blissfully unaware of the future they proceeded to plan a course of action that would give the people of the constituency a true alternative choice from that of the old line parties.

Mr. E. J. (Ted) Garland, a member at that time of the so-called ginger group of Alberta Farmers in the House of Commons, was the guest speaker following the convention. The hall was packed to capacity. For two and one-half hours this gifted speaker held the audience in rapt attention, tracing the cause and effect of the depression and pointing to the ray of hope that appeared on the horizon through the democratic action of the common people banding themselves together to become masters of their own destiny. Many of the delegates and others present went home and proceeded to lay the foundation for local poll organizations in their respective communities which to this day are still the

heart and core of the C.C.F. "Hats off to all those pioneers who did their work so well." But there was another job to be done—that of welding these local units into an effective constituency wide organization and the holding of public meetings in order to acquaint the electorate with the policies of the new party. To do this became the responsibility of the candidate and the Board of Strategy which had been selected by the Constituency Executive. There were no funds because money was scarce. The Central Office in Regina promised to send a few top flight speakers into the constituency after the election was announced, but it was the opinion of the Constituency Executive that a few big meetings alone would not be sufficient, rather that every poll should be covered by holding a meeting in or near it during the winter. This task was assigned to the candidate, who started out with a team and open cutter. The roads became so icy that many of them were impassable with horses that were not shod and there was no money to spend on shoeing horses. Therefore, the candidate started to walk from poll to poll—from school house to school house—carrying his overnight bag and brief case. Frank Bolster of Fulda joined the candidate on many of these walking tours, both of them being away from home a week or two at a stretch. Many are the stories that these two men can tell of how one consoled the other when the walking became especially tough—of the kindness and hospitality of the people who put them up for the night, of the amusing incidents that occurred at one meeting or another. This went on throughout the winter and the job was so well done that by the spring of 1934 every poll had been covered, many poll committees were organized and reliable contacts for every poll set up in the constituency records.

During seeding time that spring the Provincial Election date was announced for early June. This meant that the constituency had to be covered again by a series of larger meetings. Central Office kept its promise. The late George H. Williams spoke at one or two meetings in the constituency. M. J. Coldwell, who had been selected as Provincial Leader and had been refused leave of absence by a Regina School Board, could only give the weekends for meetings outside the City of Regina. Fortunately a young friend of Mr. Coldwell, who had a small plane, took him to most of the meetings that were too far to reach by car with the roads as they were then. This man with his plane made it possible for Mr. Coldwell to get to many places during the campaign, which he would not have been able to cover otherwise. Humboldt Constituency was fortunate in having him at Leroy and St. Benedict. The Opposition started to tell tall stories about the enormous slush funds the new party must have in order to take Mr. Coldwell around in a plane, conveniently overlooking the fact that this young chap was doing it because he believed in our cause, and he often had to wait until the collection was taken at the meeting in order to get enough money to pay for the gasoline for the next trip.

The late J. S. Woodsworth was scheduled for two meetings in the constituency. The Humboldt Skating Arena was engaged and seating arrangements provided for a large crowd. Mr. Woodsworth was to speak in Saskatoon in the afternoon and he was to be brought to Humboldt for the evening meeting by car. It rained throughout the day but the people for miles around came to Humboldt. Those unable to make it by car came by team and wagon and by 8 p.m. the Arena was filled to capacity. However, Mr. Woodsworth failed to appear because, as was learned later,

his driver not only became mired several times, but finally got lost in making some detours. (Some people that are prone to complain about our present highways would do well to let a few old timers tell them about the so-called highways of 20 or even 10 years ago.) At 9 o'clock the candidate and several local speakers addressed the audience closing the meeting at 11 o'clock assuring those present that if Mr. Woodsworth had not suffered any serious accident and was available for a later date that arrangements would be made for another meeting. The next morning as early as possible a search was commenced to locate the missing Mr. Woodsworth, who was finally found in the kitchen of a farm home some distance out of Meacham, drying the dishes for the lady who had given him shelter in her home. After hearing his account of the trip from Saskatoon, arrangements were made for him to be in Humboldt about a week later. In the meantime a large crowd gathered in Meacham for an afternoon meeting. When it came time to open the meeting the Hall was packed and there were more than that many people outside listening to the speakers over the public address system. A week later there was a larger attendance in Humboldt than had been there the night of the rain.

That was the end of outside help for that campaign and it was up to the candidate and his small group of local helpers to carry the ball to the final play at the polls. The Liberals, who had jeered and sneered during the winter, now became thoroughly alarmed; not only was the constituency flooded with Liberal speakers and literature designed to frighten people away from the new party but they also brought in roughnecked bullies who followed the C.C.F. candidate from meeting to meeting and tried to organize local groups to break up the meetings. At one place they succeeded in getting a small group to throw several cases of eggs. (This, of course, was in reality just cheap Liberal tactics because at that time eggs were only worth from five to eight cents a dozen.) These Liberal storm-troopers made themselves very obnoxious at other places too, and finally the night before the election the local people called the police to help keep order. In jig time a mountie walked into the hall, another took his place at the door and a third stood guard by the candidate's car. The meeting finished in an orderly manner but the Liberal steam roller was in operation all over the constituency. While the Liberals won at the Polls the next day with a substantial majority, they were chagrined, because for the first time in the history of the Provincial Constituency—they had failed to take the deposit of their opponent. This was all the more galling to them because in their opinion the defeated candidate and all his active supporters were only greenhorns in the political field.

The new party had received so-to-speak its baptism of fire—although defeated at the polls it had won the admiration, not only, of those who fought for their candidate but also that of a great number of others. The members of the Executive did not retire into hiding to lick their wounds but like true leaders they re-grouped their followers and in a few months time again gathered in convention to nominate a candidate to contest the Federal election which was by that time overdue.

Again their choice was Joe Burton—again he had the same hard grind to go through only on a much larger scale on account of the larger sized constituency. Again the Liberals "threw everything in the book",

plus the nomination of two dummy candidates causing vote splitting, which made it possible for the Liberals to defeat the C.C.F. in 1935. Again defeated but not discouraged the C.C.F. people in the Humboldt constituency had no time to rest because they had a Provincial by-election on their hands—reluctantly Joe once more took on the job. After that defeat he was able to give his full attention to his family and farm for a little more than a year, excepting the time he spent attending constituency and provincial conventions and serving as a member of the Provincial Executive.

In the meantime a Re-distribution Bill had been passed in the Legislature which changed the boundaries of the Humboldt Provincial Constituency considerably, losing the south west block of polls and several others—but gaining a row of Townships on the East which included Watson, Daphne, Spalding and Naicam—this latter move was no doubt made in an attempt to weaken George Williams' position in the Wadena Constituency, but in June 1938 he polled a larger vote than before and the Liberals very nearly lost Humboldt—Joe nearly made the grade. Then the Liberals needed a seat for one of their defeated Cabinet Ministers, so they opened the Humboldt Constituency hoping that by using the Liberal machine, including the Highways Department, they could foist that deal on the people of Humboldt. The people of the constituency did not appreciate being pushed around like that and "you guessed it" they nominated Joe Burton for the fifth time in less than five years. For the first time the local C.C.F. Poll Committees had help and encouragement from C.C.F. people who came in from all parts of the province to give a hand. Their strength was pitted against the whole Liberal machine. At times the voices of speakers at public meetings were almost drowned out by the clatter and din of highway machinery being moved about, but the results on August 4th, 1938, made headlines in newspapers from one end of Canada to the other. In Humboldt on the evening of that eventful day people gathered from all parts of the constituency and beyond—women wept with joy—and hard grizzled men, who had stood shoulder to shoulder through those five hard years, finding it difficult to control their emotions—silently clasped each others' hands. Later on, after the first emotional feelings were overcome music, dancing and singing gave vent to their feelings of jubilation.

However, having won one battle was only the beginning because in a short time they were in the midst of another Federal election. F. J. Bolster of Fuda was their candidate. The fact that the election was sprung in March of 1940 with almost impassable road conditions, and being a wartime election, the C.C.F. people again "took it on the chin". Nevertheless they kept up the good work and prepared themselves for any eventuality, which was very fortunate because in August 1943 they were in the midst of a Federal by-election. In the meantime the Provincial Liberal Government had extended its own term of office beyond the constitutional period of five years. On account of this, many people in the Humboldt Federal Constituency called on Joe Burton to resign his Provincial seat in protest, and to allow his name to stand for the Federal by-election. This he was reluctant to do but finally agreed. Once more the C.C.F. people of Humboldt Constituency were locked in combat with Jimmy Gardiner's Federal and Provincial political machine. The main issues were the price of wheat, which at that time was 80 cents per bushel in spite of the fact that there had been wartime

prices on most other commodities for over three years, and the Provincial Liberal Government extending their own term of office. The Right Honourable James G. Gardiner left the passing of his estimates in the hands of a Lieutenant in the House of Commons, while he spent several weeks in Humboldt and Selkirk constituencies. He threw the weight of his whole machine into the conflict. Federal and Provincial Liberal members and the majority of the Provincial Cabinet Ministers were again domiciled in Humboldt for several weeks. In final desperation they promised the Town of Humboldt water and were carrying samples of it from door to door in sealers and little tins—but the C.C.F. also had help from C.C.F. people in other parts of the Province and in spite of the Liberals again trying the vote splitting idea of running dummy candidates—Joe Burton was sent to Ottawa with a majority of close to 4000 votes. The celebrations in Humboldt were inspiring and the results were received by many people all over Canada with joy. It was indeed “an indication of things to come”.

The C.C.F. lost no time in getting ready for the next battle and within a few months had selected Ben Putnam of Watson to be their standard bearer in the next Provincial election—if and when “Billy” Patterson called it. After one more session the Liberals finally decided to take the plunge and called the long overdue election for June 15th, 1944. The C.C.F. swept into power with a landslide vote, winning all but five constituencies. Ben putnam was elected with a substantial majority to sit on the government side of the Legislature just ten years and a few days after the first C.C.F. try in the constituency. Humboldt then had a C.C.F. representative in both the Provincial Legislature at Regina and in the House of Commons at Ottawa.

The next election was the Federal in 1945—when the C.C.F. again won with a substantial majority and Joe Burton rejoined a much larger group of C.C.F. Members in Ottawa. The good and hard working—over worked C.C.F. people in the Humboldt constituency could now after nine elections in twelve years sit back, relax and take it easy for the next three years. But taking it too easy and being over confident did not help win the next election in 1948. Ben Putnam, who had given the people of the constituency able and conscientious representation in the Legislature was defeated by a very small margin of votes—this in spite of the hard work on the part of many of his followers who realized the danger of over-confidence. The 1949 Federal election followed the same pattern—although there is no doubt that the change of constituency boundaries helped the Liberals in obtaining their desired results. Complacency also had detrimental results in a number of other constituencies in Saskatchewan with the result that our representation in the Federal House was greatly diminished.

1952 brought the second Provincial election called by our C.C.F. Government. This certainly gave the lie to those Liberals who had been trying to tell the people that if a C.C.F. Government was ever elected it would be the last election they would have. At the previous session a Redistribution Bill had been passed in order to give more equal representation from the various parts of the province. Humboldt lost three good C.C.F. polls, but even so the supporters showed some of their old time fighting spirit with the result that Joe Burton was again elected to the Legislature by a good majority. “Joe” as he is known to all his

friends and acquaintances in many parts of Canada is now Provincial Secretary in the C.C.F. Government.

This was quickly followed by a Federal election in 1953. Again the Liberals at Ottawa had put through a Redistribution Bill—this time eliminating Percy Wright's constituency of Melfort and putting the greater part of Humboldt and part of the old Melfort constituencies together, calling it Humboldt-Melfort. The C.C.F. supporters, having regained their old fighting spirit, proceeded to elect Alex Bryson of Tisdale with a good majority. Alex is now our Federal Member and rendering outstanding service at Ottawa. Thus Humboldt is back in the C.C.F. column both Provincially and Federally. While much depends on the work of your members—the results of the next election will depend more on the poll committees and the rank and file of supporters than on them.

You will note that the only names mentioned are those who have been candidates and a few of the Provincial and National Leaders, but the writer wishes here and now to pay tribute and honour to that host of unnamed workers who in their respective polls and communities carried on unceasingly year in and year out—to them all honour and a great deal of credit is due for giving to Saskatchewan for the past ten years the best Government it has ever had. To name them all would make a list much too long to be included in an article such as this—and also it would be so easy to unintentionally omit one or two.

Mention should also be made of the fact that after T. C. Douglas became the Federal Member for Weyburn—he frequently helped in many of our campaigns, and since he has become Premier of the Province he has periodically visited our Constituency and his next visit is always looked forward to, not only by our friends but also by many of our opponents.

Another group of people who have played an important part in the building of the C.C.F. organization in the Humboldt Constituency are our C.C.F. women—to them also goes a lot of credit—some for the active work they have done, others for having given freely of their time to help raise the necessary funds—and last but not least those who did their part by encouraging their men folk to carry on when the going was rough and the obstacles seemed almost unsurmountable. One of these is Marjorie Burton, who seldom took part in any of the public meetings or gatherings, but who sponged the egg yolk and mud from her husband's clothes in the early campaigns and kept the worries of and farm affairs away from his attention as much as possible in order that he could give his undivided attention to the task assigned to him by the C.C.F. people of the constituency. To all of them both men and women, regardless of what major or minor role they played during the past twenty-one eventful years, is this narrative dedicated in this our "Anniversary Year."

family

Finally in conclusion it should be mentioned that with the exception of one individual, all those present at the first meeting in the summer of 1933 remained true to the cause they had embraced. Some of them have gone to their eternal reward, but everyone of them lived

to see the triumph of their first victory in the by-election of 1938. May the good God grant them an extra jewel in their crown of immortality for the good they accomplished for humanity.

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